

LutheranWoman

April 2004

TODAY

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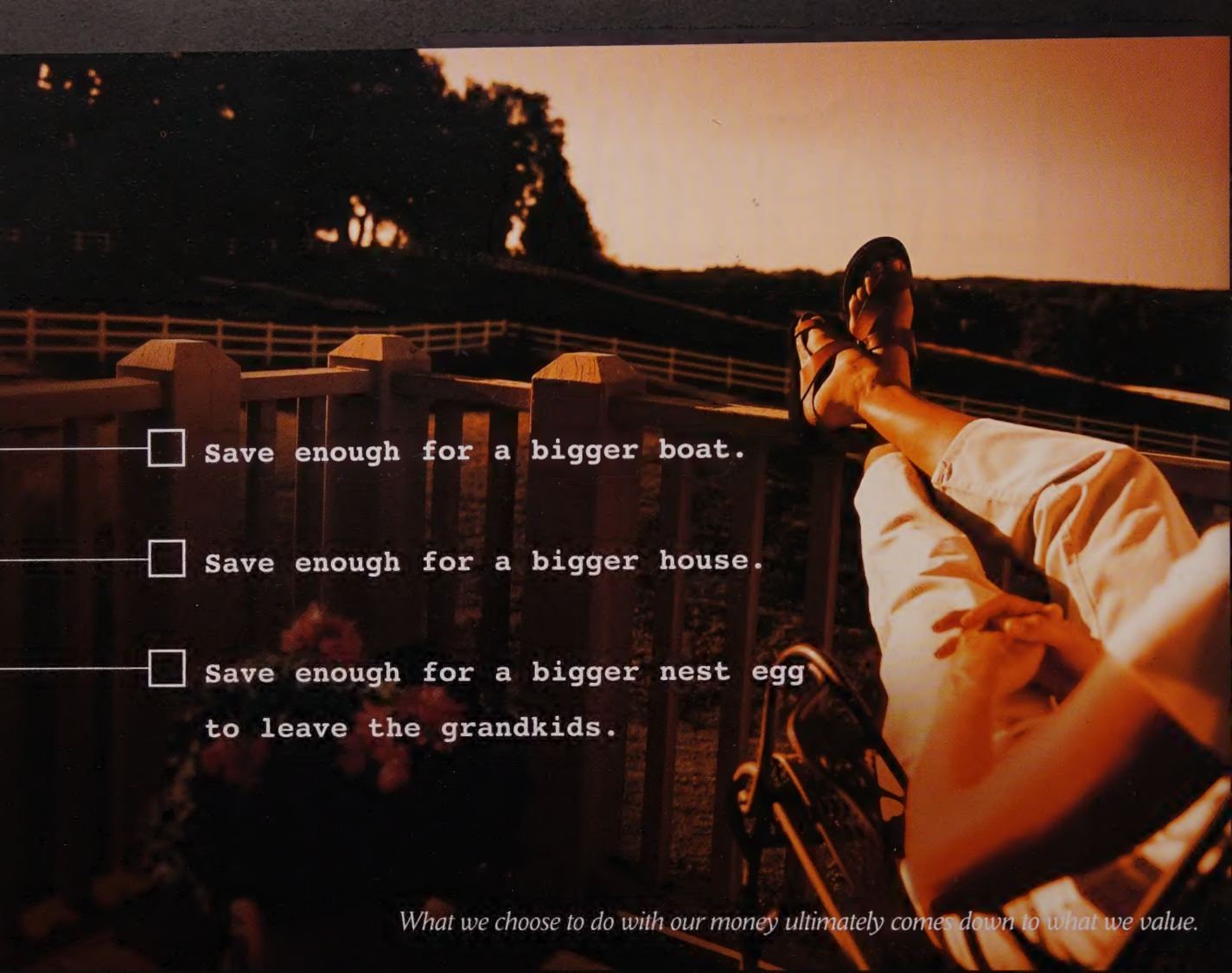
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A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing God's Measure of Success
Striving for Success in the Healing of the World




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- A person is lying on a lounge chair, their legs raised and feet resting on a wooden fence. They are wearing white shorts and sandals. The scene is set outdoors at sunset, with a warm orange glow in the sky and silhouettes of trees in the background.
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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Thanks for the great articles about fair-trade farmers and products in the October 2003 issue of *Lutheran Woman Today* magazine. After I read these informative articles, the Holy Spirit led me to organize our upcoming Thankoffering Sunday around this theme. As a result our small rural congregation is about to place its second order for fair-trade coffee, tea, cocoa, and chocolate. Praise God for this wonderful ministry across borders and cultures.

Fair-Trade Coffee Drinker,
Elizabeth Dickman

Lutheran Woman Today magazine is a very informative Christian publication, and the efforts of all the staff are much appreciated by the subscribers.

Some of the members of my Churchwomen's Circle have concerns about the monthly Bible study lessons. Our question: is the very in-depth type of presentation and study geared to the average layperson?

Since I am a nonagenarian, I harken back to the days of the American Lutheran Church, when the Bible study, in what was the Missionary Society then, leaned toward a simpler approach. It was brief, to the point, and dwelt on what was most meaningful to the members in their study. It was educational, inspiring, and enjoyable, lacking in the intensity of our modern *LWT* study.

These comments are offered as food for thought for your future *LWT* Bible studies.

Peace,
Adeline Marty

Dear Adeline and all *LWT* Bible study participants,

This letter captures a sentiment that has crossed our desks in several letters over the past few months. First, know that we have heard what you are saying and that we are using your response to help shape our future studies.

Although creating a study for nearly 150,000 potential participants is not an easy task, we do try to offer something in each study for most. As you can imagine, there are many different interest areas, comfort levels, and time frames that need to be considered. We do make every effort to include in the Leader Guide (available separately from the magazine for the September–May studies) helpful information that should bridge many such gaps for the different groups. However, we humbly acknowledge that we are more successful at this effort at some times than others.

We would like to ask each of you to consider this message from managing editor Barbara Hofmaier in a reply to a similar letter: "We encourage leaders to tailor the lessons to the needs and interests of their own group. If one question seems to be falling flat or is too difficult, please feel free to skip that one and move on. We try to make sure that the last questions bring the biblical text home to participants' lives, so we hope that people will get to the last question or two if they can."

Even if you do not care for one particular study, we hope that you will join us in September as we embark on a study of the parables of Jesus, by Audrey West. We believe you will find her study a delightful journey into a richer understanding of stories that you have known since your earliest days.

Peace,
Nancy Goldberger, editor



GIVE US THIS DAY

In the Desert Places

by Marj Leegard

THE BIBLE—A WONDERFUL LIBRARY—HAS SOMETHING FOR EVERY NEED. There may come a time that Ecclesiastes is the book for you to savor. Its author (quoted here in the Contemporary English Version) has already explored my deepest despair.

Nothing makes sense! Everything is nonsense. . . . People come, and people go, but still the world never changes. (1:2–4)

Someday the light of the sun and the moon and the stars will all seem dim to you. Rain clouds will remain over your head. Your body will grow feeble, your teeth will decay, and your eyesight fail. The noisy grinding of grain will be shut out by your deaf ears, but even the song of a bird will keep you awake. You will be afraid to climb up a hill or walk down a road. Your hair will turn as white as almond blossoms. You will feel lifeless and drag along like an old grasshopper. (12:2–5)

There are brief days and even longer periods in our lives when we fit the description quite well. Not only is the world not right; we are not right.

But when we have a sick child, we suffer pain in absolute chaos. The inversion of what we expect cannot be understood. The young live! It is parents and grandparents who begin to fail. But that is not what is happening.

“Who is smart enough to explain everything?” (8:1). We learn very quickly that explanation is not possible. Those who attempt to explain are not as

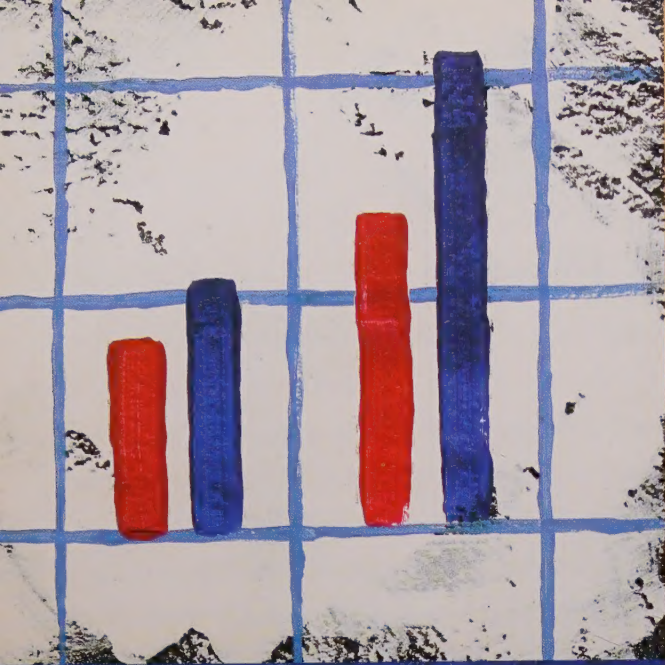
helpful as those who simply walk with us. Those walking beside us have come through trials. They understand our tears, for they have cried.

“You are better off to have a friend than to be all alone. . . .” (9:11). As I write this, in this time of our child’s illness, prayers are ascending from our own altars and from the hearts of friends miles and continents away. Each prayer becomes a kneeling cushion for our own petitions. Our gratitude for the gift of God’s presence would be a sodden offering without the buoyant prayers of our friends bearing our pleadings with their own.

We turn to the world for comfort, and then we see the sorrow of the whole universe: “The more you know, the more you hurt: the more you understand, the more you suffer” (1:18). If we stopped in appalled silence at the hunger, suffering, and death by cruel destruction, it would never end. The only relief from our pain for the world’s suffering people is unending work to heal and feed them and stop their suffering. This work may seem an exercise in futility, but we are not given a progress report and a view of the end, only a vision of the path in front of our own feet.

“Everything that happens has happened before, and all that will be has already been—God does everything over and over again” (3:15). For that we give thanks. God gives us our day and our daily sustenance and our forgiveness. Over and over again.

LWT columnist Marj Leegard and her husband, Jerome, live in Detroit Lakes, Minn.



GOD'S MEASURE OF SUCCESS

by Jessica Royer

Our lives are full—full of activity and appointments and projects and pastimes. With this fullness comes plenty of input from the world around us on how we should live and what it means to be successful—whether that means climbing the corporate ladder, having the most toys or the most friends, or maintaining a palatial estate. But as Christians, we are called to look beyond the values of our society. As women of faith, we have an opportunity to support and encourage one another as we pursue another view of success: God's. If we believe that all our blessings—material and otherwise—come from God, how can we live accordingly?

UNDERSTANDING GOD'S MESSAGE

First of all, God calls us to “be faithful, not successful,” says Pastor Sue Engh of Minneapolis. However, it is also important to note that God has made each of us rich with unique talents and abilities, which we are to use—not bury in a hole in the ground. “Part of faithfulness is to successfully live the life God intends for us,” Engh continues. But how can we determine what that life might be?

Lutheran minister John Scherer is director of the Scherer Center for Work and the Human Spirit, based in Spokane, Washington. In his consulting work with businesspeople striving for success and fulfillment, he often refers to the biblical account of creation found in Genesis. “God created the ocean and declared it good,” Scherer says. God's view of goodness or success can be explained as that which expresses our true nature and God's presence in our lives. “When we [as part of God's good creation] find a channel for our soul to be expressed in the world, that is good.”

Barbara DeGrote-Sorensen, author (with her husband, pastor David Allen Sorensen) of two books on living simply, points out another tenet of success revealed in the creation.¹ “We are to be caretakers” of all we have been given, she says, “managers of our time and resources” for God, just as Adam and Eve were assigned to be stewards of the earth and all that was in it.

Clearly, we are to use what we have been given—time, money, and talents—to fulfill God's purposes on earth. Knowing this, how can we best respond?

ACTING ON GOD'S MESSAGE

When we think of someone who lived life in open devotion to God, Mother Teresa often comes to mind—and her life of poverty. But following God is not necessarily equivalent to giving everything away. Though she was poor herself, Mother Teresa “wasn't afraid of money,” explains Engh. “She knew that resources were key to what she did. . . . Money is definitely part of the equation for making a difference in the world.”

Another part of this equation is our motivation and choice of actions. Having material wealth does not make us bad people, “but the more we have, the harder it is to acknowledge that it all belongs to God,” Engh says. Consider Jesus' statement that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God (Matthew 19:24). Rather than making our wealth, wisdom, or worldliness the focus of our life, we should see these riches as a means to an end. “Think of success in this regard as faithful living, not as giving everything up,” suggests Engh. “All the things the world calls success—those are tools we've been given. And to whom much is given, then much will be expected.”

Thoughts to consider in your own search for God's plan in your life

"Through the years I have realized more and more that I can incorporate basic concern about human beings and what God wants human life to be into my

work every day," says lawyer Stephanie Ertel. "Measure yourself by your impact on other people."

"When you begin to envision or imagine God's call, finding peace may be part of it, . . . but I worry that complacency may come along with that. The right thing is

not just what's easiest to do. Sometimes we know God's call because it's hard, and we struggle with more questions than answers," says Pastor Sue Engh.

"I've had to stretch beyond what comes easily in my role working with the Isaiah organization." As you trust God, "be willing to take risks and fail."

Although living faithfully can be a daunting task, through God all things are possible (Philippians 4:13). When we allow our faith to guide us, powerful things can occur. Take, for example, the legal career of Stephanie Ertel. Lawyers may be one of society's favorite punching bags, but Ertel, guided by her faith, has used her skills for social justice and positive change. "One of the great things about practicing law is that you don't have to choose between professional goals and faith goals," she says. "My faith is telling me to help the poor and work for justice, and my profession is telling me the same thing." Whether working in a corporate setting, trying political asylum cases for refugees, or running workshops with her husband to help people think critically about the death penalty, Ertel has used her legal talent to "make things change and solve people's problems. I have a place in the system where I can make a difference. There are people alive today who wouldn't be if I hadn't helped."

Ertel makes her efforts sound easy and natural, but we all know how difficult the right choices can be. "The problem with law is the focus on winning, on getting something you don't deserve," she explains. And such a focus is readily seen in our society at large. "I try to go into each situation and determine what would be a good outcome—not winning to take advantage or beat by trickery but winning to achieve what is fair and good. I measure success in terms of whether I'm able to get the system in this country to work more justly."

In short, whatever we do—in our careers, in our social life, in our free time—we're called to do for God's glory, Scherer points out. God's view of success is more about finding your true self and putting your faith into action wherever you are than it is about renouncing everything.

"Mother Teresa determined worth by the love from which the act was offered or the gift given," DeGrote-Sorensen explains. "The question revolves around thankfulness. There is no *should* here, only a grateful response, and that takes the Spirit working in our hearts." God knows we are not perfect and that the messages of the world sometimes overwhelm us. "But we can stay focused on letting our response to what God has given us be an act of worship. Somehow that takes the pressure off," she adds. "Worship is something we enter into, not something we can take to the bank."

CARING AS A COMMUNITY

Best of all, we do not have to travel this path alone. Involvement in a community of faith can do much to help us prioritize our efforts and find outlets for our resources and abilities. As part of her own personal calling, Engh is taking time away from her Minneapolis practice to work on a two-year project with the Isaiah organization, a part of the Gamaliel Foundation's effort to strengthen churches and make them a more vital part of their communities. As she guides 20 Lutheran congregations toward

tools for ministry and social justice, she finds herself living a successful life (in spite of a hefty pay cut!). “I’m a success if I’m living authentically—staying in touch with my gifts and calling gifts out of others,” she says. “I’m doing what I do with a sense of joy, connection, and gratitude.”

Taking part in efforts of organizations like Isaiah or putting the Women of the ELCA mission statement into action are excellent tools for finding your way to spiritual success: “As a community of women created in the image of God, called to discipleship in Jesus Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit, we commit ourselves to grow in faith, affirm our gifts, support one another in our callings, engage in ministry and action, and promote healing and wholeness in the church, the society, and the world.”

In addition, as we individually consider the resources we’ve been given, Scherer suggests that we also examine our outlook on material wealth as a community of faith. “The church has trouble relating to people who show signs of success in the world,” he points out. “We admire them and want them to do what they do for the church—make *it* successful, give

money and leadership—but secretly we judge them. We don’t believe in what they’re up to, and that paradox hurts us.” We need to build “spiritual empathy” for one another, Scherer says, and be supportive of those who go daily “into that world where people are trying to be successful.”

After all, as important as it is to minister to one another, the real mission field lies beyond. “Sometimes we tend to stay in the upper room and wash each other’s feet,” DeGrote-Sorensen says. “That’s not a bad thing, but it’s not exactly what Jesus had in mind.” It is when we reach out in service, empowered by God, that we truly find success.

Jessica Royer is a freelance writer and editor. She holds a master’s degree from the Missouri School of Journalism and teaches in the After School Matters program at a public high school in Chicago.

NOTE

1. *Six Weeks to a Simpler Lifestyle* and *Tis a Gift to Be Simple: Embracing the Freedom of Living with Less*, by Barbara DeGrote-Sorensen and David Allen Sorensen, can be ordered from Augsburg Fortress Publishers; call 800-328-4648 or visit www.augsburgfortress.org.

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Parents and Success

by Kirsi Stjerna

RECENTLY MY CHILDREN HAD TO START TAKING ALLERGY SHOTS. AT THE DOCTOR'S OFFICE, MY DAUGHTER WAS REFUSING TO TAKE THE NEEDLE FOR THE SECOND WEEK IN A ROW. Calling up all the anger in me, I sternly ordered her to take the shot. I'll never forget how she glared at me with her big brown eyes, sat down, exposed her arm, and exclaimed: "I'm not afraid of the needle but of my very own mother!" She took the shot, the nurses were choking with laughter and disbelief, and I felt awful, but oddly proud. I had succeeded in something that had seemed nearly impossible.

How does one measure one's success as a parent, anyway?

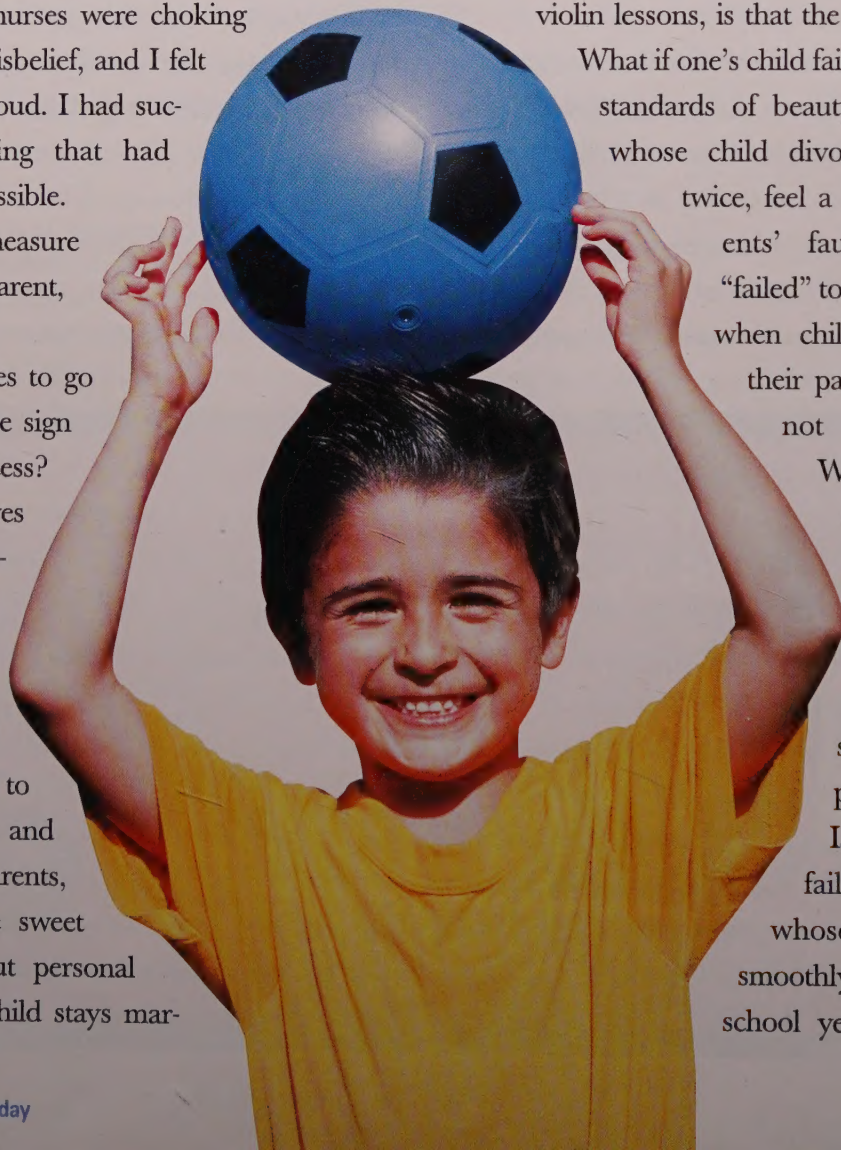
If a child chooses to go to college, is that the sign of her parents' success? If one's child achieves prominence in a profession, in earning capacity, is that the parents' ultimate measure of success? Or if a child grows to be more handsome and talented than his parents, does that taste like sweet success? How about personal relationships? If a child stays mar-

ried to the same person, is that success? If one's child never runs away and is never caught cheating, binging on alcohol, or being sexually active at an early age, is that the parents' success?

If we measure parenting success in these ways, the flip side is cruel. How many non-successes could one have without being a total failure as a parent? If a child fails to learn to read in kindergarten or wants to drop violin lessons, is that the opposite of success?

What if one's child fails to meet the current standards of beauty? Should a parent whose child divorces once, perhaps twice, feel a failure—is it the parents' fault that the child "failed" to do the expected? Or when children marry against their parents' will, that may not feel like success.

What about those parents whose children threaten to harm themselves and perhaps succeed, or fall into the drug scene or some other parents' nightmare? Is that the parents' failure? Is the parent whose teenager passes smoothly through the high school years more successful



than the one whose time in high school is so many years of pure hell? And can one talk about any measure of success if the parent-child relationship turns so bitter that the two never speak to or see each other? Whose failure or success is it, when children's choices, feelings, and turmoil are considered? It is impossible to talk about success in parenting without thinking of those deep feelings of failure.

But before that, there are the small daily failures to deal with. A mother can feel failure every night for raising her voice, losing patience, spending too much time on work and housework, praising or scolding one child too much and the other not enough, missing opportunities to shower them with love. I have recently heard tough questions from my dramatic daughter: "Is *he* (pointing at little brother) the only child here?"

Ultimate success for most parents would be keeping their children safe and happy

and "When am *I* going to get any attention?" and (naturally) from the other side, "You love Kiki more than you love me." Those words hurt every time—children are masters at pushing those buttons.

One summer day at the beach, we found that the boat rental place was closed. My son cried out, "Mom, you failed us!" Fortunately he and his sister balance such outbursts with sweet notes ("To the best mom in the world"), endless kisses and hugs, and letting me know in no uncertain terms that they miss me when we are apart.

I presume that in order to be at peace and thus feel successful, parents need to separate themselves and their fears and hopes from those of their children, who do have a free will, after all. Otherwise lives become entangled, enmeshed, and that is just not healthy. The difficult task in parenting—as in other relationships—is to be close, caring, and connected while respecting the

other's freedom and individuality.

The paradox in this parenting game is that good people can have bad kids, and bad parents can have good kids—using *good* and *bad* simplistically. Well-meaning parents can do awful things, and uncaring parents can be blessed with children who survive their neglect. Well-meaning parents can drive their children up the wall, children can choose not to give a darn about any goodness offered to them, and abusive parents can be loved by their loyal offspring. What happens to the definition of *success* here?

Ultimate success for most parents would be keeping their children safe and happy—which in reality is outside parents' control. Instead of talking about success, perhaps we should talk about our hopes—our hopes that we will see our children take charge of their

lives and make the best choices possible, and when some of those choices turn out not to be so good, that they will recover from the wrecks. We hope for these things, and for our ability to let go.

Our Lutheran theology of sin and justification by grace alone carries a powerful message to parents: We all are prone to fail in one way or another daily, as individuals and in our relationships. We fail as parents, and our children also fail—acting both against and with us. Success in this relationship is a gift of pure grace, perhaps invisible to our human eyes. It is not a success that we can claim, but it is something to be very thankful for.

Kirsi Stjerna is assistant professor of Reformation church history at Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg and a member of Christ Lutheran Church, Gettysburg, Pa.



STRIVING FOR
SUCCESS
IN THE HEALING OF THE WORLD



by Danielle Welliever

WE CANNOT ESCAPE THE INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF LIFE. BUT THEN, WHY WOULD
WE WANT TO? WHEN WE TRY TO SEPARATE OURSELVES FROM THE WHOLE, FROM
OUR NEIGHBORS, AND FROM THE REST OF CREATION, WE MISS THE GLORY OF GOD,
AND WE MISS PARTICIPATING IN GOD'S HEALING AND RE-CREATION OF THE WORLD.

Connectedness pervades every aspect of our lives. Perhaps that is why Martin Luther was so insistent on the importance of vocation, the call to our daily work in the world, as a means of giving honor and service to God and to our neighbor. Whether we spend our days farming or working in front of a computer, what we do in our daily lives is important to the whole of God's creation. Even the simple act of grocery shopping has significance.

Just think: You can play a part in the healing of the world one grocery purchase at a time. Let's consider for a moment the last chicken you bought. How many lives were touched in the production of that chicken?¹ And in what way?

U.S. INDUSTRIAL-STYLE POULTRY PRODUCTION

Industrial-style poultry production has brought inexpensive poultry to our dinner tables at the expense of farmers, processing-plant workers, and the natural world. In this method of production, 30,000 chickens crowd together in one chicken house over a layered sea of animal waste. Chemical compounds, including antibiotics and organic arsenic, are fed to the chickens to enhance growth and to control parasites and disease.

The farmers who raise the chickens have little control over their operations. Large poultry companies contract with individual farmers, known as growers, to raise the birds from the time they are chicks until they are ready for slaughter. The growers own little but the mortgages on their land and the debts they incurred to build their chicken houses to industry specifications. The grower takes responsibility for the waste the chickens produce and the chickens that die. Almost every aspect of the growing operation is controlled by the poultry company, from the feed that is used to the weighing of the birds to the price per pound the farmer will receive

for the chicken. Although the farmers take most of the risk in the growing operation, they do not share equitably in the profit. Forty-five percent of growers net \$14,000 or less for the debt they've incurred, their labor, and round-the-clock responsibility.²

The workers who butcher the chickens in large processing plants bear sizable risks to their health. Cuts to hands and fingers and problems due to repetitive motion plague workers as they process up to 90 birds a minute. Serious health threats from toxic exposure are also a reality.³ Many times, the workers are not fairly compensated for their labor; they are not paid for all the hours they work. Yet these jobs are considered relatively well-paying jobs in places where workers have few choices.⁴

We are tightly bound to the whole of God's creation. The concentration of a very large number of animals presents problems of safe storage and disposal of manure. Pollution from runoff threatens water supplies. Burning the waste moves the threats to human health and the ecosystem from the water to the air. One Minnesota community has organized to fight the burning of the arsenic-laden chicken manure. Although pollution-control devices will be put in place at the incinerator to capture the toxic emissions, some will inevitably escape.⁵ We cannot get around the interconnectedness of life on earth.

POULTRY PRODUCTION DONE ANOTHER WAY

Joel Huesby, a fourth-generation family farmer in southwestern Washington, recently joined the growing ranks of U.S. food producers who have taken on a prophetic role, calling us to remember as part of our daily life our relationship to each other, to creation, and to the Creator. For Joel and others like him, food production is more than just systems of best practices, chemical inputs, labor management, and marketing strategies that make up modern agribusiness. Food production is dependent upon relationships.



Free-range animals are let out to go wherever they may at Thundering Hooves farm.

The Huesbys' farm, Thundering Hooves, is a good model of relationship and interdependence.

Although Joel now farms in a way that reflects this understanding, he hasn't always done so. Joel began farming in the ways of modern industrial agriculture that he had been taught. After studying agriculture and agricultural economics in college, he began farming alongside his family and neighbors, growing such crops as wheat, alfalfa, and soybeans.

One day as the wheat stubble was burning in his field after a harvest, Joel had an epiphany, a moment of clarity and understanding that transcends rational thought. He had been noticing that the soil was not holding much water. For that matter, it was not holding much life either. At that point Joel realized that he and his farmland were chemically and technologically addicted. He needed more land, more fertilizer, and faster equipment to grow more crops so that he could sell more. This was necessary because commodity prices were dropping, as other producers bought more land, more fertilizer, and faster equipment in their effort to grow more and gain an advantage. He describes that experience as "a giant whirlpool with no way out." Joel, like many others who farm today, was spending more and making less, while draining the land's natural regenerative capacity.

Joel began thinking about God's creation and human stewardship of the land, about the laws of nature and about forgiveness. He wondered what it

would take to make his land healthy again, what it would take for him to live and work in proper relationship to the land. He knew he had to bring animals back into his farming operation to provide nutrients to the land. After much study and reflection, Joel began to reorient his farming practices to reflect his new understanding. He quit growing commodities to be "dumped on the market at a dump price." He began to farm not with the market in mind, but with relationships in mind. He no longer uses chemicals on the land. He raises cattle, turkeys, chickens, and other animals in a way that more closely resembles farming methods used hundreds of years ago, moving his livestock from one pasture to the fresh grass in another and allowing his chickens and turkeys to roam free. He has a relationship to the animals he tends as well as to the land he stewards. Today his land is very productive. Even the earthworms have returned!⁶

PARTICIPATING IN RE-CREATION AS CONSUMERS

As consumers, we find ourselves caught in a system in which land is abused and people are exploited, a system that we unwittingly helped to create. Because true costs are not assessed, chicken is brought to our dinner table at an artificially low price. Growers, workers, and the environment—God's creation—have been exploited to make up the difference between the true costs and what we pay at the supermarket. For the healing of the world, it's time to

exert our power as consumers and break the cycle of abuse by making more informed decisions.

You can participate in this healing by choosing food that has been grown under sustainable and just conditions. Shopping at farmers' markets and connecting with local farmers through community-supported agriculture projects are easy ways to begin to make a difference. Seek out and patronize grocery stores that stock products produced under sustainable conditions. If your local grocery does not stock such items, ask the manager to get them.

As the Spirit moves across the face of the earth,

we are witnesses to God's daily re-creation and healing of the world. We participate in it as God's new creation in Christ. We must not take our calling and responsibility lightly.

For more information on ways that you can make a difference, contact the ELCA's office for environmental education and advocacy at 800-638-3522, ext. 2281.

Danielle Welliever serves as director for environmental education and advocacy in the ELCA Division for Church in Society.

Notes

1. In its 1999 social statement, *Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All*, the ELCA calls for changes to ensure that farmers will receive a greater proportion of the retail food dollar; adequate prices for agricultural products so that farmers are compensated fairly for their labor and production costs; sustainable agricultural practices that protect and restore the regenerative capacities of the land, rather than practices that deplete the land; and more just working conditions for farm workers, especially immigrants, and opportunities for them to acquire their own land (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1999).
2. Mary Clouse, "Broiler Growers Organize to Negotiate," USDA Outlook Forum 2002. According to Clouse, the cost to build and equip one poultry house is \$125,000, while the annual net income for one poultry house is \$4,000. Seventy-six percent of growers earn \$29,000 or less per year. (See www.usda.gov/agency/oce/waob/oc2002/speeches/Clouseppt.pdf.)
3. For more information on safety concerns for poultry workers; see www.nicwj.org/pages/issues/Poultryfacts.html and www.rwdsu.com/health_safety.html#poultrysafety.
4. For a rich discussion of issues concerning poultry workers, see "Voices and Choices," the pastoral letter from the Catholic Bishops of the South at www.americancatholic.org/News/PoultryPastoral/english.asp.
5. Energy Justice Network, "Toxic Hazards Associated with Poultry Waste Incineration," 2003 (www.energyjustice.net/fibrowatch/). See also Danielle Welliever, "Bearing the Burden," *Lutheran Woman Today*, July/August 2003, 26-29.
6. Read Joel Huesby's account of his experience at www.thunderinghooves.net/story/epiphany.htm.



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A GLOBAL SUCCESS

by Denise Black



AS I PONDERED THIS ISSUE'S theme, "The Measure of Success," I was taken back to 1998.

That was when I really started to develop my own global perspective on the deeper meaning of success. That year, I took part in a mission trip to Guyana, South America. My primary role was to serve as an adult adviser to the 12 young people from my church, but whenever possible, I talked to the women in Guyana to try to understand their issues and how we, as participants in Women of the ELCA and sisters in Christ, might be able to help.

I saw and felt God's presence many times on that trip, and I returned to the United States surer than ever that we *could* make a difference. I became an advocate for global mission and encouraged the women of our synod to become more involved. The next year, as vice president of the Women of the ELCA Florida-Bahamas Synodical Women's Organization, I served as liaison to the synod's global mission committee.

One program established by the Florida-Bahamas Synod in collaboration with the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) was the Pig and Pastor Program. Using plastic piggy banks, children and adults throughout Florida and the Bahamas raised money for "second-mile giving" and provided assistance in restocking the swine population in Thiotte, a mountainous area of Haiti. The money was also used to provide credit for women's organizations and cooperatives to help the people of the region become self-sufficient. In fact, women were the ones entrusted by LWF with managing and overseeing the

project. (The "Pastor" in the program's title refers to its work with the emerging Lutheran church in Haiti to provide spiritual guidance for those involved.)

One of the project's objectives was to reinforce for the Haitian people the importance of good ecological and agricultural techniques to save what valuable topsoil remains. Over 90 percent of Haiti has been deforested, making soil erosion a severe problem. But in the Thiotte region, trees bearing mangos, avocados, bananas, and other fruits still remain. When I visited Thiotte in 2000, I realized that nestled in the understory of these trees were coffee plants, which need shade and cool temperatures. A light bulb went on when I thought of the shade-grown coffee promoted by the Lutheran World Relief Coffee Project. As a trained biologist, I could not help feeling that the landscape of Thiotte, with its flourishing trees, showed what God meant the ecology of Haiti to be, not the devastated terrain we had seen on our way there. During our visits to the people of Thiotte, I saw coffee growing everywhere throughout the village. I was told that "coffee just grows in Haiti."

I could not shake the idea that this coffee could be marketed by the Lutheran World Relief Coffee Project and its partner, Equal Exchange, a fair-trade organization committed to paying farmers a fair price for their crops. That link would help protect one part of Haiti's environment and also provide a fair income to the people of the region. (See the October 2003 issue of *Lutheran Woman Today* for more information on fairly traded coffee and other products.)

DURING OUR VISITS TO THE PEOPLE OF THIOTTE, I SAW COFFEE GROWING EVERYWHERE THROUGHOUT THE VILLAGE. I WAS TOLD THAT "COFFEE JUST GROWS IN HAITI."

I became relentless in my quest to have Equal Exchange offer Haitian coffee. I learned more about coffee processing and about export requirements and quality standards for coffee than I ever imagined existed. Equal Exchange staff members visited Haiti in 2001 to explore the possibility of business with the Haitian coffee growers and made a follow-up trip in 2002 during the coffee harvest. During the second visit, Equal Exchange gave the farmers some useful instruction on drying and handling techniques to ensure that their coffee would be of high quality.

Now the coffee produced in Haiti—Kafe Haiti—is available in the United States through Equal Exchange. As discussed in the October 2003 issue of *LWT*, the 90-Ton Challenge gives us a chance to become more involved with the LWR Coffee Project (see page 28 in this issue for an update). Are you drinking fair-trade coffee at home? How about in



your workplace or at school? Are you offering it to friends who are not part of your faith community? I have found that once people understand the principle behind fair trade, they are more than willing to pay the few extra cents to do justice.

With the involvement of the Lutheran World Federation, Lutheran World Relief, the ELCA Division for Global Mission, the ELCA World Hunger Appeal, and Women of the ELCA, could there be a more Lutheran coffee? Kafe Haiti is just one example of how God is working through us to make a difference in the world. In this case, our success is measured cup by cup.

Denise Black works in environmental management at Kennedy Space Center. She served six years on the executive board of the Florida-Bahamas Synodical Women's Organization and was recently appointed the Haiti coordinator for the synod's global mission committee.

The Gift of Love

1 Corinthians 13 Revisited

by Marianne Jones

If I speak eloquently and knowledgeably with impeccable theology, but with no love, I am no more than a carnival barker or a yapping dog. If I sing with perfect pitch and amaze the congregation with my skill on stringed instruments, but do it for my own glory, I am as discordant as fingernails on a chalkboard. If I support ministries sacrificially and exhaust myself in service, but am motivated by guilt instead of love, my best offerings are like cheap plastic trinkets.

Love suffers willingly, without counting the cost. Love doesn't care who gets the credit. Love doesn't justify self or put others down in order to feel more important. Love doesn't get a secret thrill when others are proven wrong, but is overjoyed when they are honored. Love practices possibility thinking, sees others for their potential, and believes against the odds.

Love won't quit. But where there are leaders and teachers, they will be retired; where there are ministries, their day will end. It is love that we will remember. It is love that will stay with us. Our understanding is shaky and imperfect at best, but love is always perfectly clear.

God calls us to exercise faith and hope. But the most important calling of all is to love.

Marianne Jones is a writer, actor, and dramatist living in Thunder Bay, Ontario. Her work has appeared in a number of Christian and literary publications. She is the author of *Highway 17*, a chapbook of poetry, and *The Land of Mogan*, a children's novel. Go to <http://my.tbaytel.net/mjones> for more information on her work.

A MIX OF GOOD IDEAS FROM ALL OVER

Our congregation is blessed to have the Association of International Education students worship with us each Sunday. A group of Japanese students attend St. Martin's College in Lacey, Washington, and drive a distance to visit us. We extended an invitation to the students to sing with our choir on special Sundays. The students enjoyed singing with us and now have formed their own choir, which shares special music with our congregation. In return, the students invite the congregation to events such as their annual "Play Buffet," an evening of short plays performed by the students at a regional theater.

It is our goal to continue to reach out to the students and to continue to support their events.

Rachel Root, director of worship and music—Trinity Lutheran Church, Parkland, Wash.

Our church participates in selling Equal Exchange coffee. This year we are giving a coupon for a bag of free coffee, tea, or cocoa to new members. This is a good way for us to tell them about fair trade and our "coffee ministry." We hope that they will become future customers when they come to redeem the coupon.

Chris Scanlon—Bloomington, Minn.

We started sending care baskets to anyone who needed some TLC (tender loving care). We began by collecting baskets in all sizes. After they are filled, we delivered them to new parents, the ill, shut-ins, and those who have experienced a recent death in their family. Hot soup and chili are sent to families suffering the loss of a loved one. Cookies are

also included, which are shared over coffee and conversation. These baskets bring us closer and encourage sharing and caring.

Marge Oolman—Adrian, Minn.

Zion Lutheran Church

We gather on the first Tuesday of each month to make lap quilts for nursing homes, veterans' hospitals, and shut-ins who are sick or disabled. We enjoy the day of sewing and fellowship. We feel we bring comfort and cheer to many people with our warm, pretty quilts that we sew with love and laughter.

Ada S. Keys—Blountville, Tenn.

Immanuel Lutheran Church

The women from Cambridge Evangelical Lutheran Church (CELC) in Cambridge, Minnesota, presented the nursing staff at Abbott Northwestern Hospital in Minneapolis with 30 bereavement gowns and caps as well as 40 mini-keepsake afghans for still-born babies.

CELC women have presented these items in the past to the Cambridge Medical Center. They saw the need to expand their giving, because most of the critical pregnancies in this area are sent to Abbott Northwestern Hospital, where 4,500 babies are delivered each year. This will be a continuing project for our sewing group.

The nursing staff suggested that other hospitals might welcome items like this, especially since very few receive any such gifts.

Mary Tollefson—Cambridge, Minn.

WHEN HAS YOUR ANSWER TO GOD'S CALL LED YOU TO MAKE A CHOICE DIFFERENT FROM THE ONE DICTATED BY OUR CULTURE'S STANDARDS OF SUCCESS?

When I graduated from the University of Minnesota School of Dentistry, my husband and I faced a difficult decision. We felt pressure to remain in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area because the positions there offered a dentist higher compensation and regular hours. Yet we felt a calling to return to our rural roots. We placed our trust in God and kept the words of Joshua 3:4 in our hearts: "Then you will know which way to go, since you have never been this

When everything else in my life changes, God is still there, and I am still God's child.

way before." We moved to a town of 1,300 people in southern South Dakota, where I joined the practice of another Christian dentist. We provide needed dental care in a rural area where dentists, physicians, and other health care professionals are scarce. I do not receive the compensation or benefits I would have if I had remained in a metropolitan area, but our family and I have been rewarded richly in terms of personal fulfillment, friendship, and Christian fellowship.

Dawn Stavish—Platte, S.D.

For a number of years I enjoyed being in a corporate position. The mental challenges, recognition, responsibility, authority, travel, and salary made long days away from my family seem worthwhile. My own identity was based on my professional credentials and the position I filled at work. Then things changed in my life and my job, and I was forced to examine my life and relationships. After a number of sleepless nights and desperate days and lots of tears and prayers, I quit my job. Although I had asked God for a new position, God gave me a whole new identity. I soon had a new son to care for, parents who needed TLC, a Sunday school class to teach, and time to grow spiritually. God had taken what I saw as a personal failure and a significant loss and turned it into blessings untold.

When my prayers were answered, God reminded me that my very first role, my most important role, and my final role in life is "child of God." When everything else in my life changes, God is still there, and I am still God's child.

Marilyn Kasules—Batavia, Ill.

President, Metropolitan Chicago Synodical Women's Organization

Have you had a spiritual experience that you would like to share with others? Reader Call questions for the next few issues, along with directions for submitting entries, can be found on the last page of every issue. You can address the specific question for the month or send in an account of a special experience that happened in your life. We'd love to hear from you. Send in your story today!

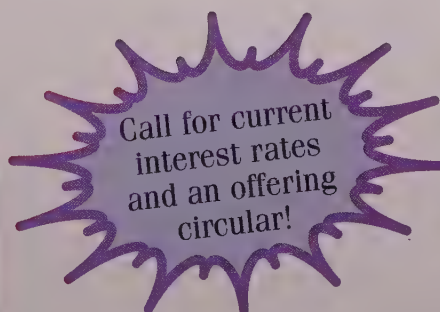


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A WOLF

in Sheep's Clothing

by Brenda Meier



In 2003, credit card companies had their most profitable year ever, bringing in more than \$20 billion. If you carry a credit card in your wallet, chances are that part of their profit came from you.



I WAS WARNED. I was told that a credit card could be a wolf in sheep's clothing. The problem for me, though, was that the wolf wasn't wearing sheep's clothing. It was wearing a leather jacket.

And it was the coolest leather jacket I had ever seen. Plus it was on sale. But there was no way my meager church camp counselor's salary, earned during the summer after my sophomore year in college, was going to provide the cash I needed to pay for it. So it only made sense to charge it to the new credit card patiently waiting in my wallet to make its debut in my financial life.

With that single purchase I was introduced to the best of both worlds—I could get what I wanted when I wanted it, because I was required only to make a small, easy monthly payment rather than cover the purchase price up front.

My credit card became one of my best friends. It was always there to do me the favor of making things available to me when my paycheck wouldn't. So my wardrobe stayed current, my CD collection kept growing, and, most important, my friends were always impressed by my ease of acquiring.

Finally, though, after six years, that wolf in sheep's clothing bared its teeth and left me facing \$9,000 in credit card debt. And considering the Federal Reserve's statistic that Americans are more than \$1.7 trillion in debt, it's clear that I haven't been the only one befriended by the wolf.

Trapped in the lair

Take, for instance, Mary Hunt, author of *The Financially Confident Woman*. In an attempt to impress the world with her success, Hunt accumulated more than \$100,000 in debt—and it all began with a charge card for her local filling station.

"My journey into the credit card abyss began quite innocently. I would never have considered my behavior irresponsible. I was simply agreeing to have it all now and pay for it later," says Hunt in her book. "I was progressive, inventive, and creative. The challenge was that in order to carry off this persona I needed money—lots of it, and more than I happened to have at the time."

It starts out simply enough—one harmless little credit card we fool ourselves into believing is necessary for us to "build our credit." (Keep in mind that the only reason someone needs to build her credit is to take on even more debt.) And with that card, it's a leather jacket, a tank of gas, dinner with a friend—or all three and more.

And we like it; we like the stuff. We also like people to think we're successful. So the natural combination of the two leads to acquiring more things, and acquiring more debt if there's not enough money to get the stuff that we want, or that other people expect us to have.

In time, though, your seemingly successful collection of stuff becomes only a thin veil covering up fear, guilt, and depression. The debt can begin to feel like a "dirty little secret" lurking just below the surface of your successful façade.

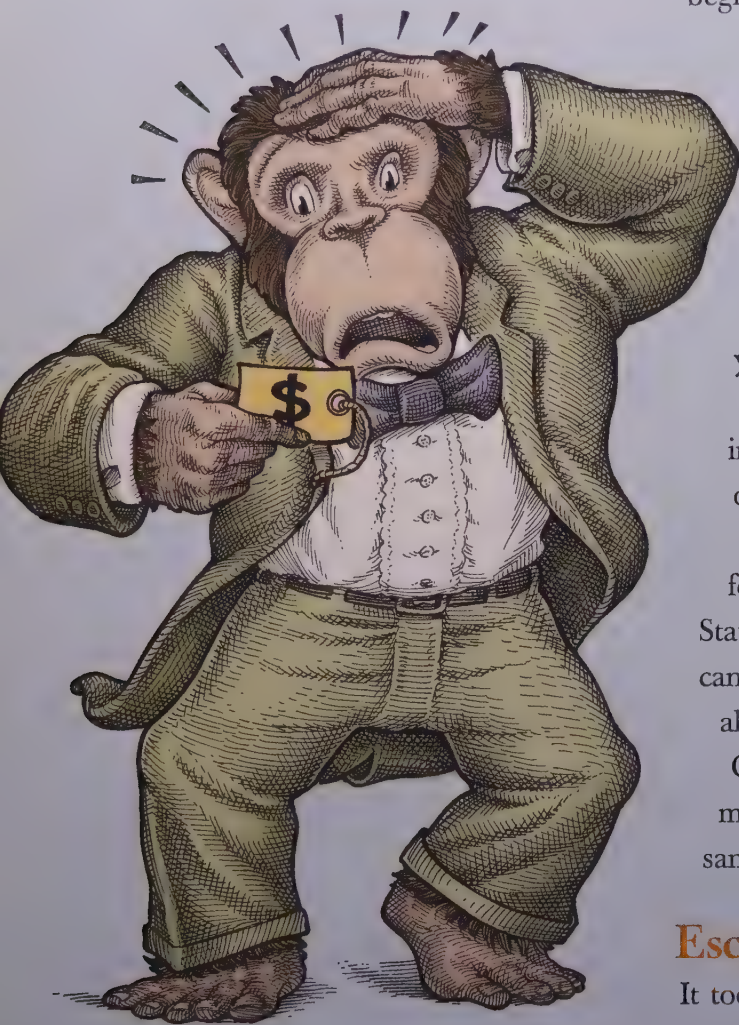
And turning things around, digging yourself back out of the debt pit, isn't nearly as easy or fun as acquiring the stuff that got you there in the first place. Peer pressure is a powerful force. It's hard to stand up to your friends, families, and co-workers and admit that you've overextended yourself and have to cut back.

Don't feel alone if you've been trapped by debt in an attempt to define success by the accumulation of things. According to www.cardweb.com, Americans hold 1.3 billion credit cards. That's five cards for each woman, man, and child in the United States. And on those credit cards the average American household carries \$8,000 of debt, which in 2001 alone accumulated \$50 billion in finance charges.

Chances are someone you know—a neighbor, family member, or fellow church member—is facing the same situation.

Escaping the crushing jaws of debt

It took Mary Hunt more than 10 years to pay off the \$100,000 debt she had accumulated. It took me more than three years to pay off my \$9,000 burden, and another four years to pay off my student loan, which had to take a back seat while I dumped every spare penny I had into paying off the credit card debt. But for both of us, an important lesson came with the struggle: crediting your success to the things you own can leave



"My journey into the credit card abyss began quite innocently. I would never have considered my behavior irresponsible. I was simply agreeing to have it all now and pay for it later."



you emotionally and spiritually bankrupt, if not financially bankrupt as well. The temporary high of having new things will eventually leave you feeling let down and wanting more in the hope that it will make you happy. But that hope is a lie. Things can't make you happy.



It's okay to like stuff and to want stuff. It may help us to meet the world's definition of success, but stuff doesn't last—it wears out, goes out of style, gets lost, breaks down, or rusts.

Romans 12:2 tells us, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." God's love and grace are the only things that are permanent.

The measure of success

So what is God's will for your success? Is it connected to how much stuff you have? Or is it tied to your relationship with God and faithfulness in service to others?

Sure, it was impressive to have lots of clothes and shoes and CDs. But you know what's even more impressive? Read John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." That is where your true success lies—not in what you have, but rather, in whom you know.

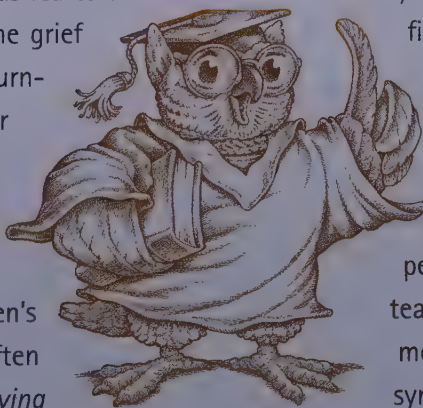
You are not your wardrobe. Or your CD collection. You are a child of God. Precious in God's sight, worth the price of God's own son. And that cost can't be financed by VISA or MasterCard.

Brenda Meier lives debt free in Baltimore, Maryland. She attends Christ Lutheran Church.

Need some help?

IF YOUR QUEST FOR SUCCESS has led to a burdensome debt load, don't let the grief or embarrassment keep you from turning things around. Look on-line or visit your favorite Christian bookstore or library for these titles:

Mary Hunt's book *The Financially Confident Woman* explores women's attitudes toward money that often lead to debt. Her *Debt-Proof Living* provides a how-to for getting out of debt,



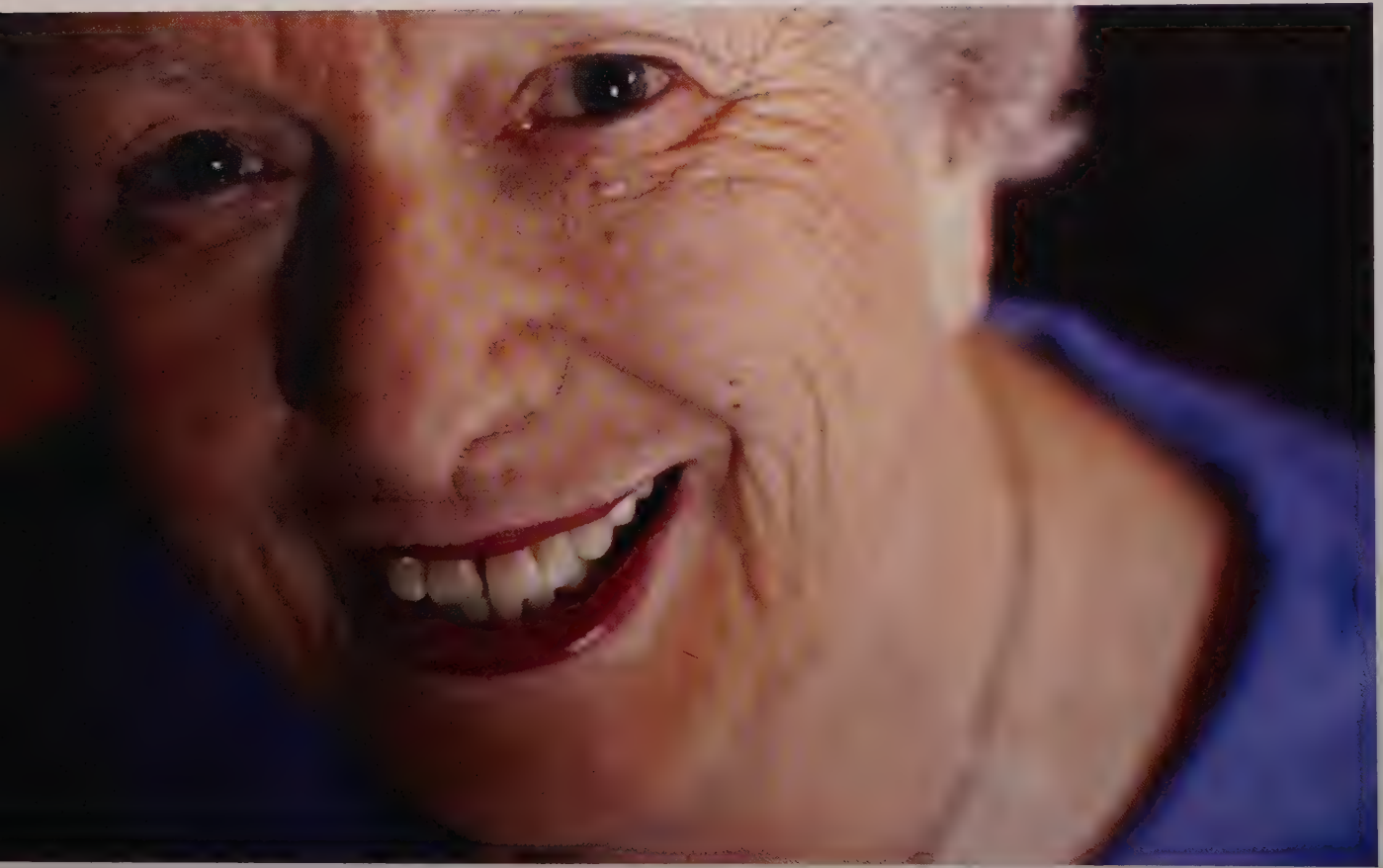
staying out of debt, and building a firm financial foundation. Learn more at www.cheapskatemonthly.com.

Dave Ramsey's newest book, *The Total Money Makeover: A Proven Plan for Financial Fitness*, compares personal finance to personal fitness and teaches readers how to strengthen their money muscles. Ramsey's nationally syndicated radio show can be heard on-line at www.daveramsey.com.

Unexpected Praise

by Joan Sellers

I HAVE DISCOVERED IN 56 YEARS OF LIVING THAT A PERSON OFTEN BECOMES WHAT SHE IS TOLD SHE WILL BECOME. IT'S AN INTERESTING THOUGHT. AS I LOOK BACK AT STRAY COMMENTS MADE BY STRANGERS, FRIENDS, TEACHERS, AND PARENTS, I REALIZE THE POWER THAT WE HUMAN BEINGS HAVE OVER ONE ANOTHER. WE CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN SOMEONE'S LIFE JUST BY WHAT WE SAY, **OR EVEN BY A LOOK.**



When I was a child, we moved from Minnesota to the suburbs of Seattle, and we looked forward to finding a new church home. Bethel Lutheran in Shoreline became that home. The congregation was still meeting in the original brown wooden church

where it had begun. That first Sunday, my family—Mom, Dad, my sister, and I—slipped into a pew halfway up the aisle. I snuggled close to Mom and peeked at the people around us. I hoped no one noticed us in our newness.

At the first hymn, we swept to our feet with the rest of the congregation, and the ringing sound of “Holy, Holy, Holy” flowed from everyone in the church. In the pew ahead of us was a stooped elderly woman. As the singing continued, she turned slowly around and looked at my mother. Mom was singing with her usual gusto and pure soprano voice. The woman’s eyes lit up, and she smiled from ear to ear. I rejoiced in the knowledge that my mom was terrific and that someone else had noticed it. That one gesture from a stranger in a new church home gave me the gift of appreciation for a musical voice. Not only did I have a new appreciation for my mom’s voice, but I was now free to sing in my own alto range. That woman’s smile opened a door.

A few years later, in the newly completed flagstone entry of that same church, a friend of my mother’s told me that I had such lively eyes, and they sparkled whenever I smiled. How often do you suppose I smiled from then on? She probably has no memory of that remark, but I still remember it 42 years later. I’d like to tell her how her comment, made in passing, has stayed with me.

These reflections make me stop and think about what I say to the young people I encounter. Do I take a minute to point out something special about each one? Sometimes I sit in the pew at my church home in northern Iowa and watch the young people as they come and go, as they doodle, whisper, or giggle. Do they know how precious they are to the congregation? It’s my job to make sure that they do.

A Sunday-school teacher once told me that my powers of memorization were great. A grade-school teacher once said I was the best math student in the class. My sixth-grade teacher told my parents she wanted to guide me into the world of science because I had such an understanding of the basics. A high-school teacher said I should be a writer

because I always looked at things in new ways.

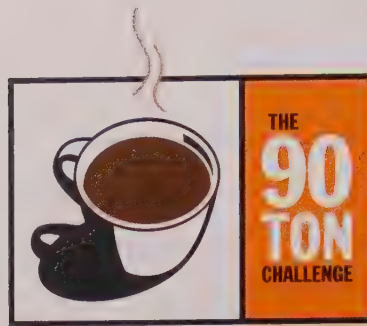
All these unexpected gifts of praise came from people who passed briefly through my life and whom I have not seen for years. But I remember their words clearly. They gave me self-confidence, the awareness that I have abilities to share and talents to use.

Of course, my parents were the primary contributors to my well-being. Dad was one of the world’s greatest huggers. He took me into his arms, and I knew I was safe. Mom laughed often and welcomed all my friends into our home as if they were her own children. Both set boundaries for my sister and me and let us know that rules would be enforced.

I have a cherished collection of egg plates because of an offhand comment from my mom. We were making deviled eggs for dinner one afternoon, and she said, “Joan, you are so good at peeling these eggs. Why do yours always come out so perfect and mine are scraped and dented?” From then on, I was “the master egg-peeler.” Now, I think of my mom every time I peel an egg, and my family enjoys deviled eggs often because of my title as the master egg-peeler. I wonder what thoughts I’ve passed on to my own children. I pray they are good ones, the kind that bring smiles to their faces.

Words are mysterious. I love the way they can express what we are feeling and observing. I delight especially in the power of words of unexpected praise. I am grateful for the gifts of words from strangers and family members that have helped form me into the woman I am today.

Joan Sellers lives in Clarion, Iowa, and is a member of First Lutheran Church. She enjoys writing, reading, and golf. Her husband, Jim, is a farmer, and the couple has two grown sons.



Pour Justice to the Brim

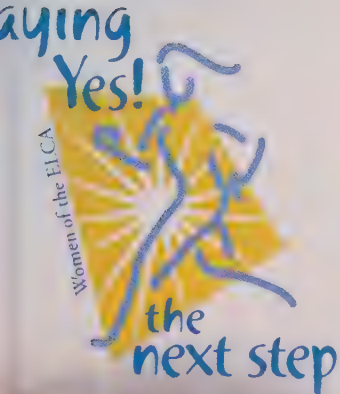
POUR IT ON!

by Brenda Meier

In the October 2003 issue of *Lutheran Woman Today* magazine, “Pour Justice to the Brim: The 90-Ton Challenge” was launched. This challenge is aimed at doubling the amount of fair-trade coffee purchased through the Lutheran World Relief (LWR) Coffee Project from 45 tons (the amount purchased through the project in 2002) to 90 tons during this yearlong effort, from October 2003 to October 2004.

As of early February (the time this article was being printed), 32 tons of fair-trade coffee had already been purchased through the LWR Coffee Project since the launching of the 90-Ton Challenge. Will you help top off this cup of justice? You won’t be alone in your efforts to promote fair trade and offer a better life to coffee farmers. There’s strength in numbers as your efforts are added to those of more than 3,400 parishes already participating in the LWR Coffee Project. Not to mention that Lutheran World Relief, Equal Exchange (LWR’s partner in the LWR Coffee Project), and Women of the ELCA will be your partners along the way. Visit www.lwr.org/coffee for ideas and resources. Call 800-LWR-LWR-2 for brochures, posters, and fliers.

Brenda Meier is the communication associate for parish projects and partnerships at Lutheran World Relief in Baltimore, Md.



Journey with Women of the ELCA as we continue to respond to our 2002-2005 triennium theme, "Listen, God is calling."

Grab a friend, come as a group, or simply treat yourself to

"Saying Yes! the next step"

Plan now on attending one of these six retreat-style events, held at a variety of locations across the country. See below for a location near you!

Don't miss your chance to meet other women of the church, be uplifted, and be inspired. The adventure begins on Friday at 7 p.m. and ends by noon on Sunday.

\$65 registration fee includes lunch on Saturday, materials, and break-time refreshments. Hotel accommodations and transportation are additional (special hotel rates have been negotiated).

For more information and to register on-line go to www.elca.org/wo or get information and registration forms by calling 800-638-3522, ext 2741. All major credit cards accepted.

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Successful Investors Focus on God's Kingdom

by Carol E. Spencer



People of all ages want to invest successfully and wisely. Web sites, magazines, radio programs, and television shows that focus on successful investing are popular. Unfortunately, pundits often define that success only as high returns. As Christians, as faithful stewards of all that God has given us, we are motivated by more than just money. And we know that the rewards of successful investing are much more than just dollars and cents.

“Strive first for the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33). Focus on the kingdom, the Gospel writer says. In the context of investing, we might say, “Use your investments for God’s kingdom.” Indeed, many people want to know that

their investments are accomplishing good things. We certainly wouldn’t make a charitable contribution to an organization that was harming the environment or mistreating workers. So perhaps we need to scrutinize the recipients of our investment dollars closely as well. What a joy it would be to know that our investments

are being used by companies and organizations that make business decisions on the basis of a concern for quality, the real needs of their customers, a healthy work setting for their employees, and clean water and air.

Social-purpose investing is becoming more and more popular. The ELCA Board of Pensions offers ELCA pastors, rostered leaders, and employees various opportunities to invest their pension funds in companies that meet certain social-purpose criteria. And the ELCA Mission Investment Fund enables ELCA congregations and their members to invest in new mission congregations. In both cases, investors know that their financial resources are being used to further God's work in the world.

Sometimes, however, people are concerned that social-purpose or mission-focused investing cannot offer the financial returns that they want. They may be seeking returns that exceed a benchmark mentioned by their financial advisor. As Christians, and as Christians investing for the sake of God's people, we are called to be aware of the difference between enough and more than enough.

Understanding and living out the concept of "enough" is critical if we are to grow as faithful stewards. If we know that God has given us enough, then we are not driven to want more, buy more, and expect more. We can instead look for new ways to use and invest faithfully and wisely the gifts that God has given us.

After all, there is more than money involved. In God's realm, everyone works together to strengthen relationships, to provide for the needs of all people, to share God's all-encompassing love. In God's gracious presence, we are willing to think more about community and less about self, more about justice and less about riches. Our investments can and do make a difference in our world, and they can be used by God

and God's people to further the building up of God's kingdom. The joys of investing grow exponentially as we discover the good things that can happen with our financial resources.

The ELCA Mission Investment Fund offers investors great satisfaction as they build relationships and partnerships. This fund, through its church-building consultants and investors, partners with young mission congregations to help strengthen their ministries. The fund makes low-interest loans to new mission congregations for purchases of land and construction of initial church buildings, enabling them to start out with the funds needed to further their ministries.

Loans are also made at competitive rates to established congregations for relocation, renovation, and expansion projects. The fund's investors experience the goodness of this successful partnership as well, knowing that their investments are being used to spread the good news of Jesus Christ.

As we grow in faith in Christ and in our understanding of the life God wants for us, we allow more and more aspects of our lives to be used for sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. From making regular offerings and gifts of our time and allowing our talent to be used for free, to accepting jobs that put our precious talents to work in good ways and allowing our investments to be used in Christ's name, we move forward in new and good ways that express the joy of living toward God's reign, successfully.

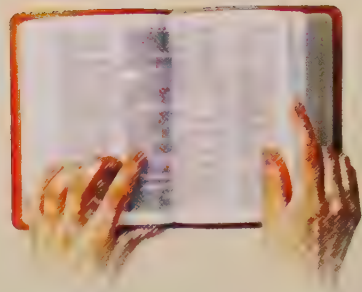
To invest successfully, focus on God's kingdom!

Rev. Carol E. Spencer is an area representative with the ELCA Mission Investment Fund, serving in the Northern Texas–Northern Louisiana, Southwestern Texas, and Texas–Louisiana Gulf Coast synods. For more information about the fund, please call 800-638-3522, ext. 2943, or visit the Web site at www.elca.org/ot/mif.

Session 8

Rubbish!

by Robin Mattison



Study Text

Philippians 3:1–4:1

Theme Verse

“Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and my crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.” (Philippians 4:1)

Overview

The Gentile Christians of Philippi have asked for advice about challenges from Jewish Christians, who desired them to conform to the rule of the Jewish Law, in particular, by circumcision.

Paul’s response neatly merges that issue with his own point about human beings’ tendency to boast, which can be seen in both sets of believers. Paul answers by pointing to Christ’s choice of humility and God’s choice to exalt the humble, obedient Christ, which were emphasized in the faith poem in Philippians 2:6–11. These are the values Paul wants the Philippians to take to heart: Christ-like and Paul-like humility, God-like exalting, and Paul-like boasting in Christ.

Paul also draws a parallel between the danger to faith presented by those Jewish Christians who wanted to carve God’s law in their flesh and the danger to faith presented by those Gentile Christians whose god was their belly, a phrase that implies everything from gluttony to sexual excess (3:18–19). Paul doesn’t want the Philippians to think that problems of the flesh are

only for Jewish Christians! As always, Paul urges the Philippians to imitate his own response to what has happened to him: All his status and his sufferings count as rubbish before the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus as his Lord (3:7–9).

Opening

At Philippians 3:2, Paul harshly criticizes the circumcision party, and he wants to make clear to his beloved Philippians that he is not directing those harsh words at them. Therefore, he sets off the two halves of this section of the letter with his usual loving addresses to his Christian family of believers. He writes, “my brothers and sisters” (3:1, 3:17), “my joy and crown,” and “my beloved” (4:1). The Philippians are his victor’s laurel crown, for their faith is evidence that he has not run in vain the race Christ chose for him.

Have someone read aloud Philippians 2:12 and 4:1, emphasizing the word *beloved* in each verse. If Paul were writing to your group of believers, he would call you his beloved as well.

First, reflect together on Paul’s consistency in addressing the assembly of believers as “beloved.” Are there other phrases, like “dear sisters,” that carry the same meaning for you?

Then talk about your experiences of praying using your prayer journal, and share some experiences from the last month in which you rejoiced in the

power of God present in others. Address each other as “beloved,” or with another word that conveys this sense for you.

Finally, conclude with a prayer of rejoicing.

Say That Again

Paul has placed so many opposing principles and actions in Philippians 3:1–4:1 that it will be helpful to outline the section.

This portion of the letter is divided into two main parts. The first part (3:1–14) concerns the danger to Gentile Christians of adopting a fleshly sign of their relationship to God, that is, circumcision as a sign of God’s favor. The second part (3:15–4:1) concerns the danger to Gentile Christians of imitating the fleshly appetites of some Gentile Christians whose behavior was shameful. Paul cites his, Timothy’s, and Epaphroditus’s vocation as the example they should imitate (“us,” 3:17b). The two parts can be outlined this way:

Philippians 3:1–14

3:1 Tells the beloved Philippians that he is writing his “dangers of worshipping the flesh” speech, as they had asked.

3:2–3 Warns against those who have confidence (who boast) in the circumcision of the flesh as a sign of God’s favor. He sets this *in opposition to* those who are the true, that is, spiritual, circumcision: those who boast (who have confidence) in Christ.

3:4–6 Describes Paul’s past confidence in the flesh (from his Jewish background).

3:7–14 Sets his status and gains as a zealous, righteous Jew *in opposition to* the greater value of knowing Christ, who has made Paul his own. Paul’s energy and focus on his goal are like those of an athlete, an athlete pressing toward the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ. Paul also sets righteousness from

God through faith in Christ *in opposition to* the righteousness he had gained under the Jewish Law.

Philippians 3:15–4:1

3:15–17 Urges the Philippians to hold fast to the gains in Christ they have already received through Paul’s witness by imitating his behavior: his pressing on toward the goal of God’s heavenly call.

3:18–19 Sets this imitation *in opposition to* the bad example of those whose god and goal are their own earthly and fleshly appetites. Their end is destruction, and they glory in what others see as shameful immorality.

3:20–21 Sets the nonbelieving Gentiles and their shameful *in opposition to* the believing Philippians, who have heavenly citizenship and whose earthly humiliation (persecution, imprisonment) will be transformed into glory.

4:1 Describes the Philippians as his laurel crown and urges them to stand firm in the Lord, just as he has done.

Paul uses repetition to reinforce his points, and that can be seen clearly. Divide into two groups. The leader will read 3:1–4:1 aloud.

Group 1 should listen for and underline or record all the phrases related to confidence, rejoicing, boasting, worshipping, and glory. Look for positive and negative examples of these; for example, Paul and the believers worship in the Spirit of God, but the enemies of the cross glory in their shame.

Group 2 should underline or record all the phrases related to earthly activities and attitudes of the body (include the earthly activities and attitudes of Paul and the Philippians too). Look for human activities or attitudes that Paul identifies as positive and as negative; for example, Paul strains forward to what lies ahead, but the enemies of the cross have their minds set on earthly things.

1. Groups 1 and 2 should now share their lists. How would you sort out the three or four sets of positives and negatives that Paul has set in opposition? (For example, a positive is **glorying in heavenly matters**; its negative opposite is **glorying in earthly matters**.)

Beware of the Dogs

Review Philippians 3:2–3. We usually see dogs as examples of loyalty and companionship. Paul couldn't disagree more! In his time, roving packs of dogs terrorized both livestock and people. Their omnivorous and indiscriminate habits made them unclean and therefore unsuitable for human companionship. To label the circumcision party as dogs and mutilators put them right down there near unclean pigs!

Although Gentiles would have known what circumcision was, only Jews valued it as a mark of the covenant with God. The Law required circumcision of all Jewish male offspring as well as all male slaves in a Jewish household (see Genesis 17:12–13, 23–27). Circumcision—the removal of the foreskin of the penis—for Jews was and still is a sign of God's covenant with Abraham that God would make Abraham's descendants into a mighty nation (Genesis 17:1–14). This physical mark also made it clear that the fertility of the 99-year-old Abraham was under the authority of another—God.

Paul did not doubt the significance of circumcision for Jewish Christians. However, he was adamant that Gentile Christian men did not need a fleshly sign of their belonging to God. That would be antithetical to

HE REALLY WANTS IT!

In Philippians 3:11, Paul raises two issues that intrigue Lutherans. In English, he is saying, "if *somehow* I may *attain* the resurrection from the dead." The Greek verb *katantao*, translated as *attain*, actually means "arrive at" or "reach," with a root that means "going downhill." Paul is making a play on words—"if somehow I may go downhill [that is, die] toward the resurrection from the dead." Remember that Paul does not believe that everyone will die before that resurrection day. Those still alive will "meet the Lord in the air" (1 Thessalonians 4:17).

We believe that our being raised from the dead is assured by God's

reconciling and justifying act in Jesus Christ. Paul affirms here that eternal life is made available to all through God's raising of Christ, but he also talks about a race to be run with resurrection as its prize (the heavenly call of God, v. 14).¹ Remember how deeply countercultural Paul finds Jesus' life and death. He does not believe that the Philippians can continue to live in such gracious obedience to God without the mind of Christ. Thanks be to God that we have been given this possibility through the Spirit of the obedience of the mind of Christ!

It is possible to fall away from the mind of Christ, as Paul points out through the example of those Jewish Christians who would

mutilate Gentile flesh by circumcising (Philippians 3:2–3). Paul aims to head off the Philippians who boast that because of God's reconciling act in Christ, they have no more obligation to God. So he, one of their models of Christ-like behavior, makes clear that he has not already obtained (3:12, Greek: "received") this resurrection or already reached the goal. A footnote in the New Revised Standard Version suggests an alternate reading for this last phrase: "Not that I *have already been made perfect*." Using this sense of *perfect*, the sentence means "I have not already been made complete" (like a finished earthenware vessel). It does not mean "without human error."

the humility of Christ, whose death on a cross marked him in a different way—as a *criminal* under the Law.

2. What benefit was it to Christians—who were Jews and Greeks, slave and free, male and female—that Paul no longer believed that circumcision was a necessary mark of God’s covenant with believers?

Ready for the Race

Review Philippians 3:4b–6. We have already seen in Philippians 1:30 how Paul used the theme of athletic competition to describe the struggle of the Christian Philippians. That metaphor surfaces again in this section. In order to impress on the Philippians the change in him, Paul boasts of his qualifications for walking with God in his former life as a Jew. This boasting is akin to the blustering of Greek athletes or Roman gladiators (or perhaps professional boxers and wrestlers today) before a contest.

Paul overlays his considerable credentials as a Jewish religious leader with the Greek rhetorical tactic of boasting, showing pride in oneself. What a combination! To Jews, Paul’s extreme boasting would have been suspect—but to Greeks and Romans, it was not. They felt that humility was for slaves, not masters.

Philippians 3:6 is only the second time we have encountered the word *righteousness* in these three letters to Gentiles. (Paul had drawn attention to the concept in his opening prayer, 1:11). For the Philippians, *righteousness* had a strictly legal meaning. It meant justice. Paul had to make clear to them what kind of righteousness he was writing about, so he regularly included further descriptions of it.

3. Paul boasts of what special social standing, knowledge, and zeal in his life as a leader among the Jews? Make a list and label it “Paul’s Jewish Status.” (You will return to this list in question 4.)

Changing Team Jerseys

Reread Philippians 3:7–11, keeping an eye out for the huge changes Paul had undergone in his convictions about himself, God, and Christ. (His argument here is quite different from the one he made in Romans 7:7–21.)

In Philippians, Paul wants to address the issue of holding a high status, since that is how the circumcised Jewish Christians would present themselves. Paul wants the Philippians to know that he now regards knowing Christ in his suffering, death, and resurrection (3:10, 12) as worth far more than his own former high status among the Jews, and therefore worth far more than any status the Jewish Christians could claim. Furthermore, he wants the Philippians to know that his own actions imitate Christ. He reintroduces a verb he had previously used to describe how the mind of Christ worked (Philippians 2:6): Christ “did not *regard* equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave.” At 3:4–8, Paul describes the things he now regards differently.

First, he regards his prior gains—background, upbringing, success, knowledge, and zeal (3:4–6)—as loss, that is, as something that now holds no advantage. Second, he intensifies his first statement by saying that he regards *everything* as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus, his Lord. Finally, he says that for Christ’s sake he has suffered the loss of all things, and he now regards these things as rubbish. To emphasize his point, Paul uses the impolite Greek word *skubalon*, which meant dung, offal, or slop.

4. Paul has come to regard all the signs of status you listed in question 3 as loss, even rubbish. Now list opposite these losses what Paul regards as his gains in Christ. Is there anything you once valued that you now count as loss because you know Christ?

ABOUT FORGIVENESS

Paul does not emphasize forgiveness as an attribute of God or believers. Forgiveness, in the priestly system Paul was familiar with, meant the restoration of ritual purity—whether by offering animal, fruit, or grain sacrifices or by showing the priest that one had been healed of a dread disease or after childbirth. It wasn't relevant to such issues as bondage to sin

through making idols of the good gifts God gave us.

But God had chosen to bring reconciliation while everyone was yet a sinner—that is, while everyone was in an unforgiven, unrestored condition. Therefore, Paul offers different messages to his three audiences: (1) to those who have not yet heard the good news, Paul offers words of God's ancient wrath, present grace, and living acts of power

in the Spirit of Jesus; (2) to those within the assembly, he offers words of encouragement, love, affection, and sympathy (1 Thessalonians 1:4–5); and (3) to those within the Christian fold who are straying, he offers confrontation and correction. It helps to remember that Paul's conversion happened when he was confronted on the road to Damascus and as he continued to learn new things about God's acting in the present in Christ.

Pressing toward the Prize

Reread Philippians 3:12–14. Paul's athletic metaphor is fully developed in this section. He is focused on the heavenly call of God in Christ (reread 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17 to remind yourself of Paul's images of this call). Paul is eagerly pressing on in a marathon race toward the goal (Greek: "finish line") for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ. As part of his commitment to that race, he deliberately lets go of his past and strains forward for what lies ahead.

Paul talks about putting his boasting in his religious background and traditions behind him in his race for the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Think of how racers pare away anything that would weigh them down or hold them back. Besides pride in religious traditions, other burdens would be the sinful effects of idolatries, such as stubbornness, anger, and immorality.

Paul believed that before God raised Christ, believers could not free themselves from these

burdensome effects of idolatry. Now, with Christ's Spirit within them, believers might have the mind of Christ and press on toward the goal of his upward call.

Imitate Me

At 3:15–17, Paul reinforces for the Philippians that they need to be mature and of the same mind when facing challenges within the Christian community. He ties his comments to the verse (2:5) that introduced the faith poem of Philippians 2:6–11: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." If there is a difference of opinion about some matter, Paul is confident that God will reveal to the community the way of thinking that is most like the mind of Christ. He makes a point of saying that he isn't the only example they have to imitate (3:17)—others have received much insight from him and his mission staff and are now serving as excellent examples for them.

5. Reread Philippians 2:6–11. Draw the parallels between

- Christ’s thinking (regard and mind)
- Christ’s emptying himself of equality with God
- Christ’s death
- Christ’s exaltation

and in Philippians 3:2–17

- Paul’s thinking (regard and mind)
- Paul’s emptying himself of his status
- Paul’s suffering and possible death
- Paul’s running for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ

How do these parallels strengthen the case for why the Philippians should imitate Paul?

Flesh

Flesh can be a confusing word for Christians reading Philippians. The word can signify parts of our bodies, our whole bodies, our earthly attainments, or the human condition (3:4).

When Paul uses the word *flesh* in Philippians, he is concerned with the values of two groups of Christians. The first group consisted of prominent Jewish Christians who valued circumcision (in Paul’s words, mutilating the flesh) as a sign of their being blessed by God. They also showed confidence in the flesh (that is, in earthly attainments) to claim righteousness before God, as Paul himself had once done. Paul’s diatribe warned the Philippians that these Christians’ promotion of circumcision was not imitative of Christ but driven by scrupulousness and pride.

The second group Paul railed against was the Gentile Christians whose god was their belly (3:18–19). In this case, the word *belly* (the Greek is also used to mean “womb”) stands for the appetites of the flesh—from gluttony and drunkenness to sexual licentiousness. Paul thought that

these Gentile Christians had too little respect for the human body, which should serve as the visible body of Christ. Their indulgence of the flesh made a mockery of their desire to imitate Christ’s obedience to God.

GO DEEPER—RESPECTING OUR BODIES

Reread Philippians 3:18–19. These issues are further developed in 1 Corinthians 6:12–20. What physical expressions (like prostitution in 1 Corinthians 6:12–20), in your view, represent too little respect for our bodies as belonging to our vocation in Christ?

Reread Philippians 3:2–5. These issues are further developed in 1 Corinthians 10:23–33. What physical expressions (like seeing circumcision as a sure sign of God’s blessing in 3:2–5, or scrupulousness over food purity in 1 Corinthians 10:23–33) represent, in your view, exaggerated reverence for the flesh?

Christ Will Transform Us

Reread Philippians 3:20–21. At the end of this section, Paul returns to a theme that was important to him in 1 Thessalonians 1:9–10 and Philippians 2:8–11. The Philippian Christians are awaiting a savior from heaven, for they have already become citizens of heaven by imitating Christ. Unlike those whose god is their belly (3:18–19), their end will not be destruction; in fact, Christ will transform their bodies—which have been humble and obedient before God and humiliated by their opponents—into Christ’s body of glory. He will do it by the power of God, who exalted him and called everyone to bend the knee and confess that Jesus is Lord (Philippians 2:10–11).

6. Think of the people you know whose life of humility shows their heavenly citizenship. How

is their humility evident to you, and in what ways might you imitate their example?

Take a Letter

St. Paul Lutheran Church, to sisters in Women of the ELCA everywhere.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We give thanks to God for your sharing Paul's letter to the Philippians with us, but we are most confused by his words! We are praying that you can help us understand them.

The kind of religious status Paul mentioned, in which he used to boast, is also important to us! We have many cradle Lutherans here, who were baptized on the eighth day. They have two Lutheran parents, and their grandfathers may even have been Lutheran pastors. Many serve on the church council, are members of our task force for evangelism, wear crosses, teach Sunday school, and have never been accused by anyone of being lawless, unkind, or immoral. Are we supposed to regard our heritage as rubbish too?

Please write to us and explain the proper relationship between boasting in Christ and boasting in our heritage.

Pray for us. We are asking God continually to crown your love with full insight so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and stumble-free as you press on toward the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Amen.

7. Respond to this community's concern. What in our tradition might make someone stumble? What in our tradition might be a help to us as we focus on the upward call of God in Christ Jesus?

Closing

As it was last month, our closing is related to the prayer journals we have been keeping. Along with *Thanksgivings* and *Petitions*, identify *Rejoicings*. Rejoicings are experiences that you have during the next month of perceiving God's interventions according to Paul's view of them: signs of sharing and unity, signs of humble rejoicing amid persecution, rescues from dire straits, works of faith, labors of love, and steadfastness in the gospel.

Proceed as in the closing last month. Each person should provide two thanksgivings and two petitions. One thanksgiving and one petition should be in relation to each participant's own life (not anyone else's). The others can be about anyone or anything in the world.

Once all have spoken, close by sharing the kiss of peace and saying, "My sister, my beloved (or dear one), stand firm in the Lord" (Philippians 4:1).

Looking Ahead

The next session is the last in this study. We will look at the final section of Paul's letter to the Philippians, 4:2–23. We will see how Paul attends to a dispute between two women leaders in the assembly and learn how Paul dealt with his lengthy imprisonment. Finally, Paul will one last time offer us the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Rev. Dr. Robin Mattison is associate professor of New Testament and Greek at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia.

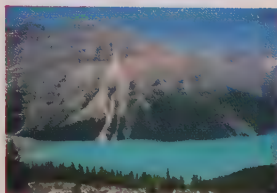
Note

1. Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (Black's New Testament Commentary) (London: Hendrickson, 1998), 217.



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this month's QUESTION

Go to www.elca.org/wo/lwt to enter your response.
(Results will appear in the September 2004 issue.)

Q: I find examples of God's work in my daily life most often

- A. through the people I meet every day
- B. when I witness splendor in nature
- C. when I receive answers to my prayers
- D. when I give of myself

Results from Question of the Month (November 2003)

Q: The topic that I would most like to see explored in a future issue of *Lutheran Woman Today* is this one:

Here's what you said:

- | | |
|---|--------------|
| A. ways to provide opportunities for youth to become engaged in their faith journey | 18.2% |
| B. ways to strengthen families so that they can face the challenges that our culture presents | 18.2% |
| C. ways that women can act boldly on their faith | 21.2% |
| D. ways to be more comfortable sharing my faith | 42.4% |

Circle of Hope: A Success Story

by Doris Strieter

THIS UNUSUAL SUCCESS STORY BEGAN WHEN LEA Lakeside-Scott decided to use her early memories of poverty, abuse, and neglect as an impetus for doing something good. She decided to develop a program that would reach lonely and troubled children with unconditional love and affirmation.

Lakeside-Scott began working informally with teenage girls in Portland, Oregon—talking, listening, and sharing. She remembered what it was like not to have a doll for comfort, and soon she and the girls were working together restoring discarded dolls to give to neglected children in the community. The project expanded and became the Hope Dolls program, with a goal of assisting teens in building self-esteem while serving their community.

This program has truly created a circle of hope. The clothing for the dolls is made by women in correctional facilities and by volunteers. Girls from a juvenile detention center in the community clean and dress the dolls. And the dolls end up in the hands of at-risk children in the community. “I wanted to make a circle where the women at the correctional facility help the girls at the detention center, who in turn help the children,” said Lakeside-Scott.

Others participate in the circle as well. The Hope Dolls Thrift Store and Craft Center receives donations and offers craft classes for teens referred by various community and school youth programs. A program director commented, “It may have been the first time for some of these students to feel that their work counts. . . . You have shown them that every person can make a difference.”

Volunteers are an integral part of the circle. Incarcerated women assist with fund-raising letters and grant writing. Local teens offer companionship to at-risk youngsters. And the Oregon Synodical Women’s Organization of Women of the ELCA has publicized the program and gathered donations.

Patrons of the thrift store also benefit. Joy, a single mother, has struggled to recover her self-esteem after an abusive marriage. After receiving a donation of clothing, she wrote, “Thank you for giving me the opportunity to again feel both proud of my appearance and competitive in the job market.”

A Women of the ELCA grant is assisting the Hope Dolls project with a mentoring program for at-risk teens to help them realize how important they are, not only to their communities and their families but also to themselves.

In this circle of hope, everyone benefits—the incarcerated teens and women, the volunteers, the at-risk families, the larger community, and the women whose generous contributions make it possible to support programs like this one.

Doris Strieter is associate for programs, Women of the ELCA.

PLEASE NOTE: We cannot accept contributions to the Hope Dolls project because it is independent of Women of the ELCA. If you would like to support other projects that empower women around the world and help create stronger communities, contact Doris Strieter, associate for programs, at 800-638-3522, ext. 2465, for information on the Women of the ELCA Grants Program. Your financial support can make a positive difference in so many lives. Consider calling today.



GRACE NOTES

HOW DO YOU SPELL SUCCESS?

by Mary Ellen Kiesner

"**HOW DO YOU SPELL SUCCESS?**" I had to think about this, especially in light of Paul's statement in Philip-
pians 3 that all things are counted as "rubbish"
because of "the surpassing value of knowing Christ
Jesus my Lord."

My mind wandered to Jesus' parable of the talents
in Matthew 25, where the master says to the servant,
"Well done, good and *faithful* servant" (Good News
Bible). Notice that Jesus does not commend the ser-
vant for being successful in multiplying the talents.
Instead he recognizes the servant's faithfulness.

Perhaps *success* should be spelled *faithfulness*.

I have witnessed the success of faithfulness
around me time and time again. I recognized it
when a friend told me that my adult daughter, who
has Down's syndrome, sat down next to a woman
who had had a stroke and said, "Hi! My name is
Amy. What's your name?" The two settled in for a
chat, though speaking is difficult for each of them.
The faithfulness that God instilled in Amy to care
for others was evident. That is success!

I witnessed it again during a phone call with my
81-year-old mother. When I asked her how she was
doing, she answered, "My body hurts like the dick-
ens. But my spirit sings!" Her faithfulness to God
surpasses her bodily infirmities. That is success!

As participants in Women of the ELCA, we see
opportunities for such faithfulness arise again and
again. I recall an African American woman who
approached me at an event hosted by Women of the
ELCA at the ELCA Churchwide Assembly. She
and her husband thanked us profusely for the

Women of the ELCA scholarship that had given
her the means to seek a second career. She eventu-
ally obtained a doctorate in theology. To me, her tri-
umph was not so much that she obtained her doc-
torate, but that she was faithful to what God was
calling her to be.

I was also impressed by a young pastor who
had gathered a heap of Women of the ELCA
resources to use in her efforts to bring together
women of all ages in her new congregation. Her
interest was not in numbers, but rather in building
community. What faithfulness, what success!

Women of the ELCA continues to seek to
remain faithful through all of its programs and
resources. It reaches out through the interaction of
its participants and staff. Faithfulness is reflected
in its antiracism and global education programs,
in its publication of *Lutheran Woman Today*, *Café*,
and *Interchange/Intercambio*, and in its grants and
scholarships, just to name a few ways. All of these
demonstrate women answering God's call, showing
a faithful willingness to make a difference in the life
of one person at a time.

Have you done a "reality check" for yourself
lately? Have you evaluated your group and your
individual mission and ministry in *faithfulness* to
Jesus Christ? Are you still listening closely to
God's call?

I pose the question again: How do *you* spell *success*?

Mary Ellen Kiesner is churchwide president of
Women of the ELCA.



A M E N !

Measuring Up

by Catherine Malotky

IT'S SUCH AN IRONY, GOD. Church should be the place where we can own most fully who we are, both good and bad. Church is where we gather in the name of Jesus Christ, the one who reorients our whole identity and assures us that we are, indeed, precious to God, in spite of our limits and shortcomings. How ironic it is, then, that we so often hide in church, revealing only our best self and burying the self we are less proud of.

No wonder so many outside of our ranks consider us hypocrites, shining our shoes for Sunday but leaving our homes and families a mess. And how many of our own have left in shame or frustration because they feared our judgment?

What gossip, what subtle avoidance, what downright rudeness have I perpetrated when I thought that another had not measured up?

I confess to you, God, that it is my own earnest desire to do well by you that often confounds me. Why am I afraid of my own failure, when I know that limited vision is part of my humanity? Of course I cannot be perfect—perfection is yours alone. Why does the desire to be perfect drive me and so many of us to try to keep score, to size each other up as if we were in competition? For what do we compete? Status, honor, regard? Perhaps. But don't we also crave to know, once and for all, that your affection is abundantly, unflappably, ours?

Yet, God, it is precisely this that we confess. Through your gift of Jesus, your son, you showed us that you love us, without condition. "Righteous

through faith in Christ" is our mantra. Why do we so quickly doubt what Jesus came to accomplish?

Perhaps, in our limitedness, we continue to seek our "confidence in the flesh" (Philippians 3:3). Perhaps keeping score feels safer than trusting your promises, especially when our own fears can make the fulfillment of your promises seem so far away.

When our flesh is scarred by evil, done to us or by us, we can wonder whether such tarnished goods belong in the world of your mercy. But your mercy welcomes us, offering to heal us, protecting us from the jostling for position that surrounds us in daily life, both inside and outside the church. Your mercy carries away the poisons that hinder us. Your mercy clears the wastes left behind from our healing. Your mercy brings us the nourishment we need to be brave again, to laugh again, to dance again.

Our confidence and hope is in you, merciful God. We can celebrate who we are, both that which we would hide and that which we would honor, because you love the whole of us. You are our unit of measure, and you have deemed us whole. When we forget, and crave more concrete, earthly measures, woo us back. Turn us from our fears and cravings so we might look into your loving face and see reflected there the wonder that we are. Amen.

Catherine Malotky serves the ELCA Board of Pensions as representative to several synods in the Upper Midwest. An ordained pastor, she has also been an editor, teacher, and parish pastor.

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July/August 2004

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What led you to make that change?

Due March 15, 2004

September 2004

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Due May 14, 2004

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Do you have an experience that relates to a Reader Call topic? Send it to *Lutheran Woman Today*! Maximum length is 550 words. If your Reader Call entry is selected for publication, you will receive a free one-year subscription to *LWT* for yourself or to give as a gift. Let us hear from you. Send in your submission to Reader Call today!

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Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Philippians 3:7-11

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